



IdeAs

Idées d'Amérique

14 | 2019

Populismes dans les Amériques

Populism as a Concept and the Challenge of U.S. History

Le concept de populisme et le défi de l'histoire américaine

El populismo como concepto y el desafío de la historia de EE.UU.

Charles Postel



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ideas/6472>

DOI: 10.4000/ideas.6472

ISSN: 1950-5701

Publisher

Institut des Amériques

Electronic reference

Charles Postel, « **POPULISM AS A CONCEPT AND THE CHALLENGE OF U.S. HISTORY** », *IdeAs* [Online], 14 | 2019, Online since 01 October 2019, connection on 08 November 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ideas/6472> ; DOI : 10.4000/ideas.6472

This text was automatically generated on 8 November 2019.



IdeAs – Idées d'Amérique est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Populism as a Concept and the Challenge of U.S. History

Le concept de populisme et le défi de l'histoire américaine

El populismo como concepto y el desafío de la historia de EE.UU.

Charles Postel

- 1 In January, 2019, Jair Bolsonaro, was inaugurated as the president of Brazil, the world's fifth largest country by population. Promising to "rescue the family" and "our Judeo-Christian tradition," Bolsonaro has built a reputation for his vitriol against women, homosexuals, indigenous people, Afro-Brazilians, and a variety of "traitors" to the country. His motto is "Brazil above everything, God above all." With Bolsonaro's rise to power, Brazil has joined an expanding list of governments that have a common approach to politics. They each have their specific histories and trajectories, and some of them share more than others do; but they have built their political power by various combinations of ethno-cultural division, racial and gender bigotry, and political intolerance. Among such governments stand the administrations of Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in India and Donald Trump's Republican Party in the United States, the second and third largest countries in the world respectively. Add to this list Poland, Israel, Hungary, Italy, the Philippines, Turkey, and elsewhere – along with kindred political parties across Europe and beyond – and it suggests that Bolsonaro's rise is part of a menacing global phenomenon (Anderson P., 2019; Anderson J.L., 2009).
- 2 This poses a series of questions about how this menace is to be understood in terms of historical roots, underlying forces, and prospects. The most basic question is: What type of political animal is afoot? And the most common answer is that Bolsonaro, Trump, and the rest, can best be understood as part of a global rise of populism. In one way or another, journalists and pundits, along with a considerable cadre of political scientists and other academics, tell us that the concept of populism is the key to understanding the forces of intolerance and bigotry that have been unleashed on the political landscape. In recent years, this claim has been made in bold headlines in newspapers and magazines of all types, and in confident titles of books, as well as

academic journals and symposia. But the more claims, the more books, the more studies the weaker the case becomes.

- 3 The weakness is reflected in the agony of definitions. In recent years, the most diligent efforts to construct workable frameworks for the meaning of populism have only shown how wobbly and unworkable the frameworks tend to be. It is partly the conflicting nature of the definitions. It is partly their ahistorical character. Political experience in the United States, as this paper explores, challenges the way that the term is being used and abused. The challenge extends to the histories of Europe, Latin America, and beyond. As an analytical concept for making sense of the present historical moment, populism is an analytical popgun.

The Definition Conundrum

- 4 There are nearly as many formulas for defining the concept of populism as there are books, papers, and treatises on the topic. The formulas, however, tend to fall within, or at least near, three interpretive models. The first might be called the European model, because it derives mainly from the European context and that is where it is often applied. This is also the simplest and most direct of the definitions: populism is the nationalist politics of hate. This is a definition provided, for example by John Lukacs, who, from his vantage point as a historian of the European carnage of the 1930s and 1940s, used the term broadly. Lukacs experienced the nationalist hatreds of war close at hand in his native Budapest before departing Hungary for the United States in 1946, where he began a long career writing about the European catastrophe. Lukacs wrote of the dangers in the "popular sentiments" unleashed by democracy, sentiments that led to national hatred – that is to say populism – and which were widespread "almost everywhere" during the long twentieth century. Hitler "was a populist," he argued, as was Emiliano Zapata and other figures of the Mexican Revolution, and so too were the U.S. Populists of the 1890s – what he described as "American national socialists of a kind." It is unclear how influential Lukacs's ideas have been, but the basic structure of his claim of populism-as-nationalism is at least widely reflected in the commentary of journalists and analysts on both sides of the Atlantic. The designator *populism* serves as shorthand for nationalistic passions, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racial and religious bigotry, and often also carries the connotation of demagoguery, authoritarianism, and political intolerance. In this usage, it is unnecessary to mention the family resemblance with the nationalist hatreds unleashed in the inter-war years that produced National Socialism, the Holocaust, and global war. Yet, as in Lukacs's jeremiads, it is the unspoken assumption in the editorials and commentaries about the populist danger (Lukacs, J., 2005: 19, 21, 61; Lukacs, J., 2013: 4-5, 70; Baumgärtner, M., et al., 2019; Mounk, Y., 2014; Galston, W., 2018: 33-40).
- 5 Then there is the Latin American model, whereby populism has represented an inclusive alternative to exclusive structures of power. In the name of the people, under conditions when formal liberal democracy has represented the narrow politics of oligarchs, populism has expanded political space to include workers, the poor, and the marginalized. In places, populism has also involved a more racially inclusive politics, especially regarding the indigenous and black communities of the Andes, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Another feature of the Latin American formula has been the key role played by the charismatic leader. From Juan Perón of Argentina and Getúlio

Vargas of Brazil in the mid-twentieth century, to Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia in the early twenty-first century, populism has represented a personalized politics that has tended towards a type of authoritarian rule that has recurred on the Latin American scene (Halperin, D., 1993: 258-66). This type of politics might also be described as Peronism, after its best-known practitioner. For the Argentine social theorist Ernesto Laclau, populism carried the promise of radical democracy, a path towards the "widening horizons" of social mobilization and political transformation (Laclau, E., 2005: 250). Federico Finchelstein offers a variation on the theme, insisting that populism is neither fascism nor an egalitarian form of democracy, but an authoritarian form of democracy that rose from the wreckage of fascism in post-war Argentina. As such, populism has played its democratic role. But with its reliance on a messianic leader and its repressive tendencies it also poses a global danger. Populism, "born at the Latin American margins," Finchelstein warns, has "moved to Washington, DC," and is "now threatening the future of our democratic times" (Finchelstein, F., 2017: XIII-XVI, 150, 254-56).

- 6 This brings us to the third and most perplexing of the models, that is the American model in which populism reveals itself as a shape-shifting phantom. In its classic iteration, this takes the form of a narrative about the People's Party (or Populist Party) of the 1890s, which originally pursued progressive and leftwing politics, but which in the second half of the twentieth century reemerged as rightwing bigotry and intolerance. This is the narrative associated with the historian Richard Hofstadter and an influential group of mid-twentieth century social scientists concerned with the social psychology of mass movements. In the work of Hofstadter and like-minded intellectuals, the anxieties, misplaced fears, and irrational delusions of the late nineteenth century Populist farmers served as the fountainhead of America's politics of unreason, demagoguery, authoritarianism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and narrow-mindedness. In his 1965 work *The Age of Reform*, Hofstadter performed a remarkable act of alchemy by finding a way to transform the leftwing Populism of the 1890s into the "illiberal and ill-tempered" and "cranky-pseudo-conservatism" of 1950s McCarthyism. He claimed that the one "soured" into the other (Hofstadter, R., 1965: 20; Ferkiss, V. 1957: 350-57; Lipset and Raab, 1978: 90-4).
- 7 This claim continues to have wide influence among journalists, pundits, and even within some of the social sciences. It has been absorbed into the European and Latin American interpretive models. Lukacs, for example, cited Hofstadter to describe Joseph McCarthy as "the quintessential populist." Similarly, Finchelstein maps the Hofstadter claim onto his own historical narrative (Lukacs, J., 2005: 51; Finchelstein, F., 2017: 155-56). The historian Alan Brinkley described *The Age of Reform* as "the most influential book ever published on the history of twentieth-century America" (Brinkley A., 1985). But this says more about the class prejudices of Hofstadter's readers, and their notions of the psychological afflictions of working people, than it does about the veracity of Hofstadter's thesis, which from the time of publication has been thoroughly dismantled. Walter Nugent, Norman Pollack, Michael Rogin, C. Vann Woodward, among many other scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrated that Hofstadter's claims about the Populist roots of McCarthyism were ahistorical, exaggerated, and otherwise unfounded (Woodward, C.V., 1960; Nugent, W., 1963; Pollack, N., 1962; Rogin, M., 1967; Postel, C., 2016a: 116-35).

- 8 Yet, Hofstadter's shape-shifting phantom continues to prowl. In part, this is due to the efforts to keep the kernel of Hofstadter's argument, while discarding what is clearly not verifiable in the historical record. Thus, for example, in his 1995 book, *The Populist Persuasion*, Michael Kazin accepts that in terms of ideology or politics there was no direct link between Populism of the 1890s and McCarthyism of the 1950s. Rather, Populism and McCarthyism shared a common "mode of persuasion," a language or style that Kazin claims offered both hope and menace across two centuries of U.S. history. He defined populism as "a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage," and who seek to mobilize the people against their "elite opponents" (Kazin, M., 1995). Leaning on Kazin, the journalist John Judis, in his recent offering *The Populist Explosion*, has given this language uncanny global power. Populism, he claims, "is an American creation that spread later to Latin America and Europe." More specifically, according to Judis, populism is an invention of the leftwing People's Party of the 1890s, that not only gave life to the American rightwing after WWII, it was also "transported" to Europe in the 1970s where it took the form of Jean-Marie Le Pen's French National Front and other rightwing movements (Judis, J., 2016: 14-19, 88-89).
- 9 These three continental models, providing three different historical narratives, are to a considerable degree incompatible, even in their most generalized form. However, to move from the general to the specific makes the problem of definitions that much more acute. In the Latin American case, for example, the charismatic or messianic leader is the norm; in the case of the People's Party and a number of other supposedly populist movements in the United States, there was no such leader. Rural militias dedicated to fighting federal central authority are claimed to be symptomatic of U.S. populism; Latin American populisms, as Laclau reminded us, were urban based and "essentially state populisms, trying to reinforce the role of the central state against landowning oligarchies" (Crothers, L., 2018: 3-13; Laclau, E., 2005: 192). The list of such fundamental differences in characteristics is a long one, and causes a series of obstacles to those who continue to insist that populism represents a useful general category of analysis. Accordingly, the number of characteristics that supposedly define populism keeps growing shorter, more indefinite, and more tentative. And, as it turns out, the contradictions of definition have so far at least proven insurmountable without a strong dose of the alchemy provided by the American model.

Populism as Americanism

- 10 In this regard the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde and his Chilean colleague Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have provided a service with their publication of *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. The authors are steeped in expertise in European and Latin American politics, and their concise book provides a synthetic explication of the idea of populism as a global concept. They finesse the contradictions in such a way as to provide a universal definition that is presumably sufficiently flexible to stretch across the continents to cover a multiplicity of political phenomena. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser preface their definition with the claim that populism is not merely a language or style, but an ideology. But that comes with a key qualifier: populism is what they call a "thin-centered ideology," that is to say it is insufficiently robust to stand on its own, and therefore attaches to "thick-centered" or "full" ideologies (for examples of the latter they list fascism, liberalism, and socialism). This poses the

immediate question: why then does populism have particular significance as a concept given that it is such a "thin" ideology with such a "restricted morphology"? (Mudde, C., 2007: 23; Mudde, C. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C., 2017: 1-6). Or why so many books and theses and symposia about so-called populism, when it is at most a vaguely defined appendage to "full" ideologies such as conservatism and rightwing nationalism? Or why is it then so important to add the designator "left-populism" to the Spanish Podemos or the Greek Syriza, movements that would be better understood as left-social democratic or a similar "full" ideological designation? The concept of populism as a "thin" ideology, however, serves the authors well, because it allows them to accept that the attenuated nature of populism means that it can only explain so much. Nonetheless, at a certain point thin becomes threadbare (Mudde, C., 2016).

- 11 Reducing its characteristics to its essential minimum, Mudde writes that populists view society as divided "into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite.'" And in line with this division, he claims that populists also hold that "politics should be an expression of the *volanté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, C., 2007: 23). That populism involves a contrast between a virtuous and victimized people and a corrupt or malign elite, may seem plausible, but dig a little deeper, and it poses more problems than it answers. Among such problems, there are plenty of rightwing nationalists on the political stage who do not pay much attention to this division. Take Jair Bolsonaro, for example, a former military captain who built his career as a legislator with military votes, and who finds political virtue mainly with the torturers and authoritarians of the Brazilian officer corps (Anderson P., 2019; Anderson J. L., 2019). It is difficult to detect what is "populist" about the Bolsonaro administration with its "motley cabinet, made up of climate change deniers, free-market ideologues, and ultra-right conspiracy theorists" (Baiocchi, G., & Silva, M., 2019). Then there is Donald Trump, who rarely speaks about "the people," and endlessly boasts of his place among the global plutocrats, monarchs, dictators, billionaires, and other elites. Cas Mudde has recognized this about Trump, and has suggested that he may not be a populist at all, but that only his political base is populist (Mudde, C., 2015). There is, however, a better explanation. Trump has built his political career on crude appeals to nationalist sentiment, both in the sense of big-power chauvinism and especially ethno-cultural bigotry. Trump takes this as a point of pride. "You know what I am?" he recently asked the crowd at a rally in Texas, "I'm a nationalist, O.K.? Nationalist. Use that word, use that word" (Sonmez, F., 2018; Baker, P., 2018). Indeed, when it comes to "thick ideology," nationalism fits, not only Trump, but also his base supporters in their Make America Great Again caps. And this is not any type of nationalism, but a rightwing nationalism of ethno-cultural division and exclusion and the subjugation of the weak by the strong.
- 12 There is, however, a more generalized problem here: virtually all politics in the United States, at least since the early days of universal white male suffrage, have been rooted in the assumption that the will of the people is measured by the results of elections, and those elections have inevitably revolved around the narrative of the people taking on the elites at the ballot box. For the last two hundred years, the stage of American politics has been crowded with military generals and wealthy slave holders, corporate lawyers and millionaires, with a few academics and a large number of professional politicians – all playing the part of the representatives of the plain people, or the common man, or the middle class, or the silent majority, in their struggle against the

elites in Washington. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser recognize this reality and explain that: "The idea that the people are virtuous and the elite corrupt has been propagated in both high and low culture throughout the history of the United States," and they conclude that populism has been part of the American political "mainstream" since the days of Thomas Paine. They suggest that this is different from Europe with its tradition of suffrage restrictions and where elite politics have had greater prominence. For Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser then, American political history is essentially populist history. It is the notion of populism as American political language or style repackaged as a global "thin" ideology. (Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C., 2017: 106-08).

- 13 America, of course, has never been separate from the world. Here it might be noted that there was a reason why Thomas Paine departed the United States for revolutionary Paris. Moreover, nineteenth century France also experienced its moments when "the people" confronted various elites on the political stage. The Revolution of 1848 was such a moment. In Marx's account of events, the democrats, based on the newly expanded suffrage, claimed to "constitute the 'PEOPLE,'" and to represent the "people's rights," and the "people's interests" against their elite "oppressors." And Louis Napoleon also pointed to ballot results to claim himself, "as against the bourgeoisie," the representative of "the farmer and people in general" (Marx K., 1913: 16, 57, 131, 155). Indeed, in modern political history, juxtapositions of the people and the elite have complex roots in the dynamics of political legitimacy and representative governance. Perhaps then, populism is just another way to define popular politics under the conditions of broad suffrage. But that is clearly not what Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser have in mind, because populism in their descriptions has a distinctly menacing aspect, the whiff of dangerous, anti-pluralist, intolerant, and authoritarian politics. And, their first proof lies in the lessons of U.S. populism, from the People's Party of the 1890s, through the fires of McCarthyism, to the depredations of the Trump White House (Mudde C. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C., 2017: 22-27).

The Achilles Heel

- 14 But this American lesson only works if one ignores the overwhelming historical evidence. More precisely, it is based on ignoring a vast body of scholarship about the actual history of Populism in the United States. Over the last half-century and more since the publication of *The Age of Reform*, scholars have published an extensive catalogue of monographs and articles based on deep archival research on U.S. Populism. This is a rich historiography, reflecting widely different methods, interests, and interpretations. Lawrence Goodwyn and Bruce Palmer saw the Populists through the lens of the New Left. Sheldon Hackney, Elizabeth Sanders, Charles Postel, and Gregg Cantrell have placed the Populists in the broad left current of a social democratic, progressive, or modern liberal (in the American sense) tradition. Robert McMath, Jr. and Steven Hahn focus on the rural roots of Populism, while the work of Thomas Clinch and Michael Pierce point to its urban and labor foundations. Studies by Barton Shaw and Gerald Gaither give less credence to the racial benevolence of the Populists than other studies have, whereas Omar Ali points to the presence of an African American populism. Essentially none of this archival research has sustained the Hofstadter thesis. Quite the contrary, it has left it in ruins. Yet, essentially none of it has informed the work of Mudde and the other theorists of global populism (Goodwyn, L., 1976; Palmer,

B., 1980; Hackney, S., 1969; Sanders, E., 1999; Postel, C., 2007; Cantrell, G., 2014; McMath, R., 1975, 1993; Hahn, S., 1985; Clinch, T., 1970; Pierce, M., 2010; Shaw, B., 1984; Gaither, G., 1977; Ali, O., 2010).¹

- 15 A very different U.S. Populism comes into view if one takes this scholarship into account. The literature on the American movement is too extensive to properly review in this short essay, but the basic facts are clear enough. Populism was mainly a farmer-labor movement whose roots took hold in the egalitarian zeitgeist of the post-Civil War decades. Unlike a traditional political party, the People's Party was formed as a "congress of industrial organizations" that brought under one political roof farmer, labor, women's rights, and associated movements ideologically connected by their demands for economic, sexual, and in some cases racial equality. As Noberto Bobbio reminded us, the "element of egalitarianism" typifies what is "called and universally recognized as left-wing." U.S. Populism, however, was not just any type of leftwing movement, as its egalitarian ideology took shape in a specific time and global context. It was part of the politics of "progressive social and economic equalization" that defined the broad current of late-nineteenth century transatlantic social democracy. In other words, in terms of general categories, U.S. Populism was a social-democratic movement and not a populist one. As Federico Finchelstein points out, "pundits often ahistorically confuse social democracy, progressive politics, and populism." U.S. Populism has been the subject of exactly that type of ahistorical confusion, whose depths are reflected in the following three observations (Postel, C., 2019: 3-10, 305-08; Bobbio, N., 1996: 71; Kloppenberg, J., 1986: 6-7, 184; Finchelstein F., 2017: vx).
- 16 First, the People's Party had no particular commitment to the idea of "the people," much less "the homogenous people." Rather, the party was founded on explicit interest group politics; it was to be a combination of multiple "class interests," not in the Marxist or Weberian sociological sense, but in the sense of commercial or occupational or professional interests. Charles Macune, the leading theorist of the Farmers' Alliance, the largest of the Populist constituencies, explicitly rejected agrarianism and other precepts that failed to recognize agriculture as a business interest like every other (Dunning, N., 1891). The Minnesota Populist Ignatius Donnelly, often spoke of society (or the people) being comprised of multiple interests or classes and, as he told a group of Minnesota farmers, by securing "justice from other classes," the goal was "not to oppress others but to prevent others from oppressing you" (Donnelly, I., 1873). Similarly, Terence Powderly, the leader of the Knights of Labor, a massive organization of wage earners, called himself "an equalizer," because he believed in equality among workers across skill, sex, and (within limits) nationality and race, and equality for wage earners among other occupations and professions (Powderly T., 1940: 36, 48-51). But as a labor leader, Powderly did not theorize about "the people" as such, any more than the farm leaders did. It would be a mistake, therefore, to read too much into the name "People's Party," because in the nineteenth century this was simply a common party name when "Democratic" or "Republican" were already taken. Also, the famous Preamble of the Populists' "Omaha Platform," refers to the "plain people," and repeats the word people several times in the manner that was nearly universally practiced in nineteenth century politics (People's Party, 1892). Here it should be noted that Ignatius Donnelly was the author of that Preamble, and although he was a mercurial figure of iconoclastic opinions, his opinions were complex when it came to society's divergent interests. Moreover, the Preamble introduced the Populists' platform, which reflected

not the unitary interests of a "homogenous people" but a mix of labor and farmer demands – from the eight-hour day to the progressive income tax – that would have been typical of a farmer-labor coalition of that era. And there was nothing simplistic about Populist proposed solutions. Compared to the moralistic dogma of “Gold Bug” and corporate conservatives, Populist ideas about the currency, farm credit, business regulation, and other matters were flexible, complex, and carefully reasoned, and more often than not they have been sustained by history.

- 17 Second, far from being "anti-pluralists," most Populists were committed to a representative electoral system. This was tested in practice when the People's Party held state and city office. In power, as compared to the political abuses involved in either Democratic or Republican governance, Populists tended to provide models of transparent, law based, and equitable administration. Among other accomplishments, they worked to professionalize law enforcement and break the grip of party rings over policing. They protected the franchise among African Americans and the poor in North Carolina, and extended the suffrage to women in Colorado and elsewhere (Beckel, D., 2010; Clanton, O., 1969; Larson, R., 1986). At the same time, Populists demanded the secret ballot at a time when employers and party bosses openly bought votes, and blacklisted voters who cast ballots for dissenting candidates. They also demanded the direct election of U.S. senators at a time when senate seats were purchased through bribes to state legislators, and similarly they proposed direct legislation via referenda as an answer to corporate influence buying. Direct legislation implied an element of majoritarianism, but gained support among workers and farmers within the historical context of the extraordinary corruption of Gilded Age politics.
- 18 Apart from practical politics, however, panaceas and utopias also circulated within the Populist movement. Perhaps the most influential was Henry George's single tax on land values, a solution to economic inequality that was widely embraced among Populist constituencies. George viewed his single tax as a way to realize the "ideals of the socialist" but without confiscations or political repression. In fact, it was something of a classically liberal idea along the lines of the wealth taxes proposed today by the likes of Tomas Piketty or Elizabeth Warren (George, H., 1881: 410; Piketty, T., 2014: 515-539; Irwin, N., 2019). Perhaps less liberal, and less pluralist, Populist thinking was also influenced by notions of a cooperative commonwealth as articulated by two books: Laurence Gronlund's *Cooperative Commonwealth* and Edward Bellamy's futuristic novel *Looking Backward*. Both works painted an egalitarian future without politics or government, a harmonious future to be realized through harmonious evolution. Their socialism was part of the transatlantic intellectual movement of Fabian, humanist, and Christian socialisms – that is to say socialism stripped of the dyadic conflict – of the “us against them” – that is supposedly resting in the heart of the so-called populist menace (Gronlund, L., 1885; Bellamy, E., 1888; Postel, C., 2019: 279-95).
- 19 Third, Hofstadter's claims about the Populists as the fountainhead of American bigotry, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism have been refuted in depth in the scholarship.² But Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser have adopted a twist on the same argument. American Populists, they claim, have always been informed by "producerism," the notion of the people as "producers" who are "squeezed between a corrupt elite above them and a racialized underclass below them" (Mudde C. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C., 2017: 23-4). This claim about the Populists is also made by the analyst Chip Berlet, who defines producerism as the idea that hardworking Americans, defined as white males, engage

in scapegoating as they fight perceived "parasites at the top and bottom of society" (Berlet, C., 2012: 47-66). Indeed, that is a good description of the late nineteenth century logic of white supremacy in the Democratic Party and ethno-cultural bigotry in the Republican Party, a logic that also afflicted the trade unions, and professional societies of the time. The Populists did, indeed, speak in the name of producers, but what makes the Populists historically significant was the extent to which their egalitarian commitments ruptured this exclusive logic. This included organizing the "tramp armies" of the unemployed and destitute, and providing a political home for hundreds of thousands of women seeking economic independence and equal citizenship. Its declarations about racial inclusion were less bold, and were too often self-contradictory. Nonetheless, key Populist constituencies openly challenged a narrow producerism as so defined.

- 20 This especially holds for the Knights of Labor, which rejected trade unionism based on the "aristocrats of labor," in favor of "industrial organization" based on "the salt of the earth," that is "the millions of unknown toilers who do the work of the world" (Powderly, T., 1940: 42; Powderly, T., 1880; Knights of Labor, 1886). At its core, the Knights was an organization of the Irish and other mainly immigrant laborers who mined coal and laid railway tracks. But in line with its egalitarian doctrine of inclusion across sex, race, and skill, it also enrolled cooks, washerwomen, housekeepers, seamstresses, ditch diggers, and cotton pickers, including overworked and underpaid black women and men of the rural South. At its height the Knights of Labor was not only the biggest labor organization in U.S. history (and probably world history) to that point, it was also the most inclusive large-scale institution of its era. Recognizing this inclusiveness, Friedrich Engels described the Knights of Labor as "the first national organization created by the American working class as a whole" (Engels, F., 1987: 130-40, 140).
- 21 There was, however, a gaping hole in the Knights' egalitarian ethos, and that was its hostility to Chinese immigration. Although Chinese workers joined the Knights in New York, on the West Coast the organization fought hard for Chinese exclusion. The false accusation leveled against the Chinese was that they were, like convict labor, unfree "bound" labor. But two things happened when the Knights of Labor united with the Farmers' Alliance to form the People's Party. On the one hand, unity with the white farmers fractured the Knights' connection with the black poor in the South. And on the other hand, influenced by white farmers in California who depended on Chinese labor, as well as other reformers interested in Asia for humanitarian and spiritual reasons, the forging of the People's Party dampened the agitation for Chinese exclusion. In a word, this story is complicated, but the decontextualized notion of producerism tells us little about its dynamics (Postel, C., 2019: 231-37, 302-05; Postel, C., 2007: 185-86, 264).

The U.S. Populist Legacy

- 22 In one of its last acts, the Knights of Labor facilitated an electoral agreement between the white Populists and the black Republicans of North Carolina, overturning at the ballot box the corrupt, pro-corporate, and racist tyranny of the Democratic Party. But the Democrats got their revenge in a self-styled "white supremacy campaign" that unleashed the Wilmington massacre of 1898, and drove the Populist-Republicans from office with rifles and torches. From that time until the 1960s, the Democratic Party

established an anti-pluralist, murderously repressive monopoly of power in the states of the former Confederacy, and it did so as the self-described party of white supremacy. George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, was entirely the product of that Democratic Party. Yet, for Mudde, Judis, and others, George Wallace represents late twentieth-century U.S. populism (Mudde C. & C. Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 25; Judis J., 2016: 32-8). But Wallace, in style and substance, was cut from the same mold as the Democrats who launched the "white supremacy campaign" against the North Carolina Populists. Blaming the Populists and not their Democratic enemies for Wallace is an ahistorical travesty. Similarly, Republican businessmen and academics, not Populist dirt farmers, spearheaded xenophobic campaigns against Jewish, Italian, and other European immigrants. Madison Grant, a New York Republican millionaire, scientific racist and virulent anti-Semite, did as much as anyone to put the politics of preserving the "Nordic master race" in the center of American politics. And the notion that the Populist legacy gave the world Trump, another racist Republican millionaire from New York, is beyond inexplicable (Spiro, J., 2009).

- 23 It is inexplicable because the Populists actually left a clearly distinguishable legacy in American politics. With the demise of the People's Party, with a few notable exceptions, the Populists either went with Eugene V. Debs into the Socialist Party, or entered the progressive or farmer-labor wings of the Democratic and Republican Parties. In the early twentieth century, the Populist strongholds of Oklahoma and Kansas provided the Socialist Party with some of its best recruiting grounds. Progressive legislative reform of the early twentieth century mapped closely along the congressional lines of farmer-labor Populism. Lyndon Johnson, the New Deal liberal who signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and thus earned the hatred of Wallace and his ilk, learned his politics at the knee of his grandfather, a Populist cotton farmer from central Texas. Perhaps most significantly, during the Depression, the United Mine Workers, the inheritors of the Knights of Labor's ideals of egalitarian and inclusive organizing, unleashed the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the labor movement that helped spark the civil rights revolution and that was at the center of mid-twentieth century progressive and social-democratic politics. This Populist legacy is reflected in today's campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, with Sanders hanging a picture of the labor Populist and Socialist Eugene V. Debs on his office wall, and with Warren proposing post-office banking and similar proposals once sustained by the Populists and Socialists of her native Oklahoma. In short, the Populist tradition is part of a broad political current as stable, deep, and constant as any other political current in American history (Miller, R., 1987; Argersinger, P., 1995: 173; McMath, R., 1993: 206; Sanders, E., 1999; Cantrell, G., 2014; Kelley, R., 1990: 138-51).
- 24 The existing general theories about a global populism turn this egalitarian or social-democratic tradition into an unusable past. This is especially a problem in the U.S. context, where the conflicted, arbitrary, and ahistorical uses of the term populism threaten to strip it of any viable meaning (Postel, C., 2016b). But it is not just an American problem, because the U.S. example of populism supposedly shape-shifting from left to right is being used as the case study for a general concept, a concept fraught with contradictions and ahistorical thinking. Worse, its main function is to muddy the distinction between leftwing politics of equality and rightwing politics of inequality, and it does so exactly at a wrong historical moment. Norberto Bobbio's work *Right and Left* insisted on the importance of making the distinction between the two

political categories. However, as Perry Anderson observed, Bobbio wrote this in the mid-1990s, a historical moment when the practical distinction between the right and the left shrank, with the left, in the form of British New Labor, Clintonian New Democrats in the United States, and Social Democrats across Europe, moving to the center to join hands with the centrist conservative parties. Anderson suggested that Bobbio was insisting on a distinction that was increasingly blurred, as even the vocabulary of right and left was losing its meaning in the swamps of the centrist middle (Anderson, P., 2005: 129-39). But the apparent centrist consensus has frayed. Most importantly, rightwing nationalist parties, including ruling parties in countries around the world, are engaged in what they see as a pitiless struggle against the so-called left, or a supposed "cultural Marxism," or other enemies of the nation. Bolsonaro is not Modi, and Trump is not Orbán, but in the name of the nation, religion, the family, and order – the classic shibboleths of the nationalist right over the last two centuries – they share a common commitment to the class, gender, and racial/ethno-cultural hierarchies of power.

- 25 The break with the centrist consensus, at least up until now, has been an overwhelmingly rightwing nationalist phenomenon. There has been no corresponding shift on the left as, for example, much of the U.S. Democratic Party and European Social Democracy (where it has not disintegrated) remain in the centrist middle. But there are small signs – Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, a faction of Labor in Britain, and so forth – of a reinvigorated social-democratic left. In the United States, too, this is reflected in the Sanders and Warren campaigns. In his attempts to define the populist concept, the political scientist Jan-Werner Müller makes a significant point of clarification by explicitly excluding leftwing social democratic movements, including the U.S. People's Party of the 1890s, from the populist category (Müller, J.-W., 2016: 87-93, 98). But in the main, the advocates of populism as a general concept insist that leftwing movements that critique the centrist middle are a contiguous part of the populist phenomenon. For some commentators, the use of the concept in this way is pregnant with possibilities. John Judis, for example, who writes about the "merit" of "Mr. Trump's nationalist policies," explains that when it comes to the blight of immigration and similar matters, if the left could accept "what is valid in today's nationalist backlash," then it, too, could surf the populist wave (Judis, J., 2016: 159; Judis, J., 2018). But this is more than an apologia for xenophobia and nationalism; it is a failure to recognize the dynamics of the rightwing surge. However, for Mudde and like-minded theorists, the use of the concept of populism serves as a warning: the so-called "left-populists" share a "dark side" with the "right-populists." The populist beast that inhabits territory outside of the centrist middle belongs to an unstable and potentially dangerous category. As Hofstadter suggested back in the frightening days of the early Cold War: beware departures from the centrist consensus.

A Modest Proposal

- 26 There is no easy way out of the confusion, but a modest step towards some type of clarity would be to ground the concept of populism on a firm historical foundation. Exactly where that will end is yet to be determined, but perhaps it will lead in the following direction:

- 27 The present usages of the term populism cannot be packaged into a coherent whole. Among other things, the continental models are inherently contradictory and incompatible. It is a mere word game, not a historically based analysis, to suggest that the phrase populism can overcome those contradictions. In Latin America, for example, populism is understandably bound up with a history of a type of personalistic and nationalist politics that has often combined charismatic leadership with an expanded polity in terms of class and race. In the United States, by contrast, populism has deep historic roots in labor-farmer social reform. Of course, these historical processes were not hermetically sealed. For example, a case might be made that in the 1930s Huey Long, whose redistributive politics reflected the earlier Populism, emerged as the political boss of Louisiana with its sugar and oil extractive economy, and in doing so resembled a Caribbean strongman – a historically and geographically grounded argument (Lloret Rodà, M., 2016). Given such variable and incompatible meanings, the use of populism as a concept may prove most promising within the boundaries of particular histories and places.
- 28 At the same time, history has left us with nearly universal concepts that do lend themselves to transnational analysis. Social democracy is such a concept. Ethno-cultural nationalism is such a concept, as is xenophobia, racism, religious bigotry, and other variants. Then there are the concepts of the left and the right that have maintained their significance since the days of the French Revolution. These are concepts based on different perceptions of “what makes human beings equal and what makes them unequal,” and which ultimately shape societies in fundamental ways (Bobbio, N., 1996). In the 1950s, U.S. Cold War social scientists cooked up the ahistorical fallacy of a shape-shifting populism in an attempt to erase the distinction between left and right. In the present historical context, as self-avowed rightwing nationalists run amok across much of the globe, reasserting the most savage inequalities, it seems like a propitious moment to propose that we give this overworked fallacy a rest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ali, Omar H., *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886-1900*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2010
- Anderson, John Lee, "Southern Strategy: In Brazil, a Budding Authoritarian Borrows from the Trump Playbook," *The New Yorker*, April 1, 2019
- Anderson, Perry, *Spectrum from Right to Left in the World of Ideas*, London, Verso Books, 2005
- Anderson, Perry, "Bolsonaro's Brazil," *London Review of Books*, February 7, 2019
- Argersinger, Peter H., *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1995
- Baker, Peter, "Trump and Cruz Put Aside Vitriol to Present a United Front," *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 2018

- Baumgärtner, Maik, et al., "The Right Wing Populist Plan to Destroy Europe," Spiegel Online, May 24, 2019
- Baiocchi, Gianpaolo, and Silva, Marcelo K, "The War on Brazilian Democracy," Boston Review, May 27, 2019
- Beckel, Deborah, *Radical Reform: Interracial Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2010
- Beeby, James M., *Revolt of the Tar Heels: The North Carolina Populist Movement, 1890-1901*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2008
- Bellamy, Edward, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, Boston, Ticknor & Co., 1888
- Berlet, Chip, "Reframing Populist Resentments in the Tea Party Movement," in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*, Rosenthal, Lawrence, and Trost, Christine, eds., Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, p. 47-66
- Berlet, Chip, and Lyons, Matthew N., *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, New York, Guilford Press, 2000
- Bobbio, Noberto, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 1996
- Brinkley, Alan, "Richard Hofstadter's the Age of Reform: A Reconsideration," *Reviews in American History*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1985, p. 462-80
- Cantrell, Gregg, "Lyndon's Granddaddy: Samuel Ealy Johnson Sr., Texas Populism and the Improbable Roots of American Liberalism," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 118, 2014, p. 133-56
- Clanton, O. Gene, *Kansas Populism, Ideas and Men*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1969
- Crothers, Lane, "Why Populism? Why Now? An Introduction," *Populism*, vol. 1, 2018, p. 3-13
- Donnelly, Ignatius, "Speech to North Star Grange," Rochester (Minnesota) Federal Union, May 10, 1873.
- Dunning, Nelson A., *Farmers' Alliance History and Agricultural Digest*, Washington, DC, Alliance Publishing, 1891
- Durden, Robert F., *The Climax of Populism: The Election of 1896*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1965
- Engels, Friedrich, Letter to Kelley-Wischnewetzky, December 28, 1886, and Preface to *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, January 26, 1887, in *Marx and Engels on the Trade Unions*, Kenneth Lapides, ed., New York, Praeger, 1987
- Ferkiss, Victor, "Populist Influences on American Fascism," *Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 10, 1957, p. 350-57
- Finchelstein, Federico, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2017
- Galston, William A., *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018
- George, Henry, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions, and the Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth*, New York, D. Appleton, 1881

- Goodwyn, Lawrence, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976
- Gronlund, Laurence, *The Cooperative Commonwealth: An Exposition of Modern Socialism*, London, Modern, 1885
- Hackney, Sheldon, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969
- Halperín Donghi, Tulio, *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1993
- Hild, Matthew, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor & Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth-Century South*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2007
- Hofstadter, Richard, *The Age of Reform*, New York, Vintage, 1955
- Hunt, James L., *Marion Butler and American Populism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003
- Irwin, Neil, "Elizabeth Warren Wants a Wealth Tax," *New York Times*, February 18, 2019
- Judis, John B., *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, New York, Columbia Global Reports, 2016
- Judis, John B., "What the Left Misses About Nationalism," *New York Times*, October 15, 2018
- Kazin, Michael, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, New York, Basic Books, 1995
- Kelley, Robin D. G., *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1990
- Kloppenber, James T., *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986
- Knights of Labor, "Platform," in *Labor: Its Rights and Wrongs*, Washington, DC, Labor Publishing Co., 1886
- Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso Books, 2005
- Larson, Robert W., *Populism in the Mountain West*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1986
- Lester, Connie L., *Up From the Mudsills of Hell: The Farmers' Alliance, Populism, and Progressive Agriculture in Tennessee, 1870-1915*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2006
- Lipset, Seymour, and Raab, Earl, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1977*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978
- Lukacs, John, *Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005
- Lukacs, John, *A Short History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2013
- Lloret Rodà, Mariona, "Greater Caribbean Strongmen: Leadership Styles in Louisiana and Cuba in the 1920s and 1930s," Ph.D. thesis, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2016
- Macune, Charles, in *National Economist*, March 30, 1889
- Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Chicago, Charles H. Kerr Co., 1913
- McMath, Robert C. Jr., *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1975

- McMath, Robert C. Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898*, 1993
- Miller, Robert Worth, *Oklahoma Populism: A History of the People's Party in the Oklahoma Territory*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1987
- Mitchell, Theodore C., *Political Education in the Southern Farmers' Alliance, 1887-1900*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1987
- Mounk, Yascha, "Pitchfork Politics: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, 2014, p. 27-36
- Mudde, Cas, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007
- Mudde, Cas, "The Trump Phenomenon and the European Radical Right," *Washington Post*, August 26, 2015
- Mudde, Cas, "Europe's Populist Surge," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, 2016, p. 25-30
- Mudde, Cas, and Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017
- Müller, Jan-Werner, *What Is Populism?*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016
- Nugent, Walter, T. K., *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1963
- Ostler, Jeffrey, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1993
- Palmer, Bruce, "Man over Money": *The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1980
- People's Party, "Omaha Platform," July 4, 1892
- Perkins, J. Blake, *Hillbilly Hellraisers: Federal Power and Populist Defiance in the Ozarks* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017
- Piketty, Thomas, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2014
- Pollack, Norman, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962
- Pollack, Norman, *The Just Polity: Populism, Law, and Human Welfare*, Urbana, University of Illinois, 1987
- Postel, Charles, *The Populist Vision*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007
- Postel, Charles, "The Tea Party in Historical Perspective: A Conservative Response to a Crisis of Political Economy," in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*, Rosenthal, Lawrence, and Trost, Christine, eds., Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, 25-46
- Postel, Charles, "The American Populist and Anti-Populist Legacy," in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*, John Abromeit, et al, eds., London, Bloomsbury, 2016a, p. 116-35
- Postel, Charles, "If Trump and Sanders Are Both Populists, What Does Populism Mean?" *The American Historian*, February, 2016b
- Postel, Charles, *Equality: An American Dilemma, 1866-1896*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019

Powderly, Terence V., *The Path I Trod: The Autobiography of Terence Powderly*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1940

Powderly, Terence V., "Trade Unions," *Journal of United Labor*, June 15, 1880

Rogin, Michael Paul, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967

Sanders, Elizabeth, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999

Sonmez, Felicia, "Trump: I'm a Nationalist and I'm Proud of It," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2018

Spiro, Jonathan P., *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*, Burlington, University of Vermont Press, 2009

Woodward, C. Vann, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," in *The Burden of Southern History*, Louisiana State University Press, 1960

NOTES

1. See also Argersinger, 1995; Beeby, J., 2008; Durden, R., 1965; Hild, M., 2007; Hunt, J., 2003; Lester, C., 2006; Mitchell, T., 1987; Ostler, J., 1993; Perkins J., 2017; Pollack, N., 1987 These titles represent merely a sampling of the significant works of post-Hosfstadter scholarship. Yet, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser refuse to engage any of it apart from a dismissive reference to Lawrence Goodwyn and his "popular agency approach" to history. Instead they rely on Kazin's *Populist Persuasion* and Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons' *Right-Wing Populism*, neither of which provide for more than a glancing treatment of the actual Populists (Kazin, M., 1995; Berlet, C. and Lyons, M., 2000).

2. For a discussion of this literature, see Postel C., 2016a: 116-35.

ABSTRACTS

This paper explores the viability of populism as both a historical category and a political concept. Its starting point is the historical example of the first mass political expression that formed under the name of populism, and that was the U.S. People's Party of the 1890s. Although it carried the nickname of the Populist Party, this had virtually none of the meanings that were attached to the term populism at a later date. Historical populism in the U.S. was a farmer-labor movement that corresponded to labor and social-democratic movements across the late 19th - century capitalist world. This poses the challenge: is populism a capacious enough concept to include the U.S. historical precedent? Or does including the U.S. precedent render the category and concept toothless or even useless?

Cet article explore la viabilité du populisme en tant que catégorie historique et concept politique. Son point de départ est l'exemple historique de la première expression politique de masse qui s'est formée sous le nom de populisme, c'était le Parti du Peuple aux Etats-Unis dans les années

1890. Bien qu'il porte le surnom de Parti Populiste, il n'a pratiquement aucune des significations qui ont été attachées au terme populisme à une date ultérieure. Le populisme historique aux États-Unis était un mouvement paysan-ouvrier qui correspondait aux mouvements ouvriers et sociaux-démocrates du monde capitaliste de la fin du XIX^e siècle. Cela pose le problème suivant : le populisme est-il un concept suffisamment expansif pour inclure le précédent historique américain ? Ou bien l'inclusion du précédent américain rend-elle la catégorie et le concept impuissants, voire inutiles ?

Este artículo explora la viabilidad del populismo como una categoría histórica y un concepto político. Su punto de partida es el ejemplo histórico de la primera expresión política de masa que se formó bajo el nombre de populismo, y que fue el Partido del Pueblo de los Estados Unidos de la década de 1890. Aunque llevaba el sobrenombre del Partido Populista, esto prácticamente no tenía ninguno de los significados que se le atribuyeron al término populismo en una fecha posterior. El populismo histórico en los EE. UU. fue un movimiento campesino-laboral que correspondió a movimientos laborales y socialdemócratas en todo el mundo capitalista de fines del siglo XIX. Esto plantea el desafío: ¿es el populismo un concepto con capacidad suficiente para incluir el precedente histórico de los Estados Unidos? ¿O incluir el precedente de EE. UU. hace que la categoría y el concepto sean ineficaces o incluso inútiles?

INDEX

Palabras claves: populismo, nacionalismo, Estados Unidos, democracia social, xenofobia

Keywords: populism, nationalism, United States, social democracy, xenophobia

Mots-clés: populisme, nationalisme, Etats-Unis, social-démocratie, xénophobie

AUTHOR

CHARLES POSTEL

Charles Postel received his Ph.D from UC Berkeley, and is a professor of history at San Francisco State University. He has been a fellow at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies and the Stanford Humanities Center, and a Fulbright scholar at the Roosevelt Institute of American Studies. His book *The Populist Vision* (Oxford 2008) won the Bancroft Prize. His latest book is, *Equality: An American Dilemma, 1866-1896* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2019).